

IF ONLY . . .

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Devarim

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Sponsored by Nathan and Rikki Lewin on the yahrzeit of Nat's mother Peppy Lewin (Pessel bat Naftali a"h)

The midrash Yalkut Shimoni comments on the verse in our parashah (1:2), "Eleven days from Horev [i.e., Har Sinai], by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-Barnea," as follows: Rabbi Yehuda says, "If Bnei Yisrael had merited, they would have entered Eretz Yisrael in three days, as it is written (Bemidbar 10:33), 'The Ark of the Covenant of Hashem journeyed before them a three-day distance to search out for them a resting place.' 'A resting place' can only mean Eretz Yisrael, as we read (Devarim 12:9), 'For you have not yet come to the resting place or to the heritage that Hashem, your Elokim, gives you.'" Rabbi Bena'ah says, "If Bnei Yisrael had merited, they would have entered Eretz Yisrael in one day, as it is written (Shmot 13:4-5), 'Today you are leaving [Egypt], in the month of springtime. And it shall come to pass, when Hashem will bring you to the land . . .'" Rabbi Yose ben Chanan says, "If Bnei Yisrael had merited, they would have entered Eretz Yisrael the moment they had stepped out of the Yam Suf, as it is written (in our parashah--1:21), 'Go up [from the sea] and possess [the Land]'. [Until here from the midrash.]

R' Chaim Palagi z"l (1788-1868; rabbi of Izmir, Turkey) writes: Just as one is rewarded for each step he takes when he walks to the bet ha'knesset, so every step one takes on his way to Eretz Yisrael is a mitzvah, and an angel is created from that step. Had Bnei Yisrael entered Eretz Yisrael quickly, as the various opinions in the midrash suggest, they would have lost that merit. Even so, the additional 40 years of performing the agricultural mitzvot in Eretz Yisrael that they would have gained would have far outweighed the merit of taking extra steps on the way to the Land. (Artzot Ha'chaim p.24)

"They turned and ascended the mountain and came until the Valley of Eshkol, and spied it out. They took in their hands from the fruit of the Land and brought it down to us . . ." (1:24-25)

Why did the Spies bring samples of the fruits of Eretz Yisrael specifically from a valley?

R' Pinchas Halevi Ish Horowitz z"l (1731-1805; rabbi of Frankfurt, Germany, Talmud commentator, and early adherent of the chassidic movement) suggests: Our Sages teach that there was no mountain or hill in Eretz Canaan on which there was not an idol. Therefore, the Spies were concerned that fruit growing on a mountaintop might be an asheirah / a plant that had been worshiped. Accordingly, they took fruits from a valley. (Panim Yafot: Shelach)

R' Aharon Lewin z"l Hy"d (1879-1941; rabbi of Rzeszow, Poland and member of the Polish parliament; killed in the Holocaust) offers another answer:

The halachah is that one does not bring bikkurim / the offering of the first fruits from a field in a valley because fruits that grow in a valley are of inferior quality. Therefore, to support their claim that Eretz Yisrael was unsuitable, the Spies brought back "inferior" fruits, as if to say, "If the inferior fruit is so big that eight people are needed to carry a bunch of grapes, imagine how abnormal the good fruit is!" (Ha'drash Ve'ha'iyun)

"For Hashem, your Elokim, has blessed you in all your handiwork; He knew your way in this great Wilderness; this forty-year period Hashem, your Elokim, was with you--you did not lack davar (literally, 'a thing')." (2:7)

The midrash Yalkut Shimoni records the Sage Rabbi Nechemiah's interpretation of this verse: "You did not lack [but] davar / a word"--The only thing you were lacking was the right word. If you asked, Hashem gave you whatever you wanted. If you asked for the mahn to taste like veal, it tasted like veal; if you asked for the mahn to taste like steak, it tasted like steak; etc."

R' Pinchas Altshul z"l (1747-1823; student of the Vilna Gaon; rabbi and maggid / preacher of Polotsk, Poland) observes: This is an example of the countless miracles that occurred to our ancestors that are only hinted at in the Torah. All their needs were cared for, as were all the needs of their flocks and their belongings. For example, we are taught that they never had to change their clothes because their clothes grew with them. In our experience, clothes that are worn in a hot climate for just a few days begin to smell, but we read in Shir Ha'shirim (4:11) that Bnei Yisrael were surrounded by sweet smelling grasses that overpowered any unpleasant odors.

The Maggid of Polotsk concludes: If you will reflect on each of these things and Hashem's kindness will grow in your eyes, then you will be overpowered by awe at His abilities and His greatness. "He is blessed forever, amen v'amen!" (Drush L'Yetziat Mitzrayim)

Tishah B'Av

Why did Hashem choose exile from Eretz Yisrael as the punishment for the Jewish People rather than some other form of suffering? R' Shmuel Yafeh Ashkenazi z"l (Turkey; 1525-1595; author of commentaries on many midrashim) offers thirteen reasons:

- (1) Eretz Yisrael receives special attention from Hashem, as we read (Devarim 11:12), "A Land that Hashem, your Elokim, seeks out; the eyes of Hashem, your Elokim, are always upon it." This is why our Sages say (Ketubot 110b), "Whoever lives in chutz l'aretz is like one who has no G-d" [in contrast to a person in Eretz Yisrael who is under G-d's constant watch]. Eretz Yisrael is Hashem's palace, and one who rebels against the King in the King's palace obviously cannot remain there. Therefore, exile is an appropriate punishment.
- (2) If Yisrael are sinful, then being together will reinforce and strengthen that sinfulness. Therefore, it is better that they be dispersed, as we read (Tehilim 92:10), "The doers of iniquity shall be dispersed." Similarly, our Sages say (Sanhedrin 71b), "Dispersion of the wicked is good for them and good for the world."
- (3) Just as a mitzvah performed by a multitude is of greater value [i.e., "B'rov am hadrat melech"], so the larger the group that commits a sin, the graver the sin is. This is another reason why dispersion of Yisrael is appropriate when they sin.
- (4) As long as Yisrael remained in their Land, they had a false sense of security which made repentance impossible.
- (5) Exiling Yisrael was an act of kindness, because a sin committed outside the King's palace is less grave than one committed in the palace.
- (6) Exile brings merit to the Jewish People, because it creates the opportunity to be a positive influence on other nations.
- (7) Also, exile brings merit to the Jewish People because, by remaining loyal to Hashem despite persecution from their host nations, they earn His favor.
- (8) Exile of the Jewish People sanctifies Hashem's Name by publicizing to the whole world that Hashem does not tolerate sin.
- (9) Also, Hashem's name is sanctified when the Jewish People allow themselves to be killed al kiddush Hashem rather than give in to their hosts' demands that they apostatize.
- (10) Hashem had sworn that the Generation of the Exodus would never enter His home [i.e., Eretz Yisrael] (see Psalms 95:11). [The halachah is that if one vows that another may not enter

his house, and then his house is destroyed and he builds a new one, his vow is annulled.] By exiling His people, Hashem made it possible to have a fresh start and to allow the Generation of the Exodus to enter the Land at the time of techiyat ha'meitim.

(11) Wandering in the Exile reduces Yisrael's opportunity to sin.

(12) Exile is a form of punishment and reduces the need for other punishments, which would have been harsher had Yisrael remained on their Land. This is what our Sages mean when they say: "Hashem poured His anger on sticks and stones," i.e., He lessened the need to punish the Jewish People by destroying their homeland.

(13) Finally, because the majority of Yisrael sinned, it was necessary to impose a collective punishment. Had He chosen death or disease, that would have destroyed His people. Therefore, He chose exile. (Yefeh Enayim: Parashat Devarim)

Pirkei Avot

Rabbi Chananiah ben Teradyon says, "If two people are sitting and no words of Torah pass between them, this is a session of leitzim (literally, 'scoffers'--one of the most derogatory terms used by our Sages)." (Ch.3)

R' Shmuel Aharon Rabin z"l (19th century; rabbi of Krotshin, Galicia) writes: We read (Shmot 19:2), "They journeyed from Refidim and arrived in the Wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the Wilderness, and he, Yisrael encamped there, opposite the mountain." Our Sages comment on the use of the singular, "He, Yisrael encamped there," and say, "Like one man with one heart."

Why was it important for Bnei Yisrael to be united when they received the Torah? R' Rabin explains: There is a midrash which states that the Hebrew name "Yisrael" is an acronym for "Yesh shishim ribo otivot la'Torah" / "There are 600,000 letters in the Torah." [The number 600,000 represents the number of Bnei Yisrael that left Egypt. In fact, there are only 304,805 letters in the Torah. See below.] Each letter, standing alone, is nothing. A letter by itself cannot convey a mitzvah or a message. Only when the letters form combinations are they of any value. And, only all of the letters together make the whole Torah.

Every Jew is like a letter. By himself, he cannot give off his "light." But, in combinations, Jews' spiritual lights can shine. And, when all of the Jews unite, they can receive the Torah.

In contrast, when two Jews sit together and no words of Torah pass between them, they are throwing away that potential. For that, they deserve to be called "leitzim." (Einei Shmuel)

Many commentaries have offered ways to reconcile the midrash, "There are 600,000 letters in the Torah," with the fact that there are only 304,805 letters in the Torah. R' Yaakov Kaminetsky z"l (1891-1986) notes that the letters of the Torah take up the width of approximately 600,000 letters. In this calculation, a yud or a vav counts as one letter, while a shin counts as three letters, and so on for each letter. (Emet L'Yaakov)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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